DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 556 EA 024 817

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TITLE A Study of the Marginal Teacher in California.
PUB DATE Jan 93
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, November 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Low Achievement; Public Schools; Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Burnout; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Evaluation; Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS *California; *Marginal Teachers

ABSTRACT

As the nation gears up for a massive educational restructuring, a major issue regarding thousands of teachers who function at substandard levels has yet to be addressed, and even the latest educational restructuring proposals show little concern for this problem. Indicators of marginality include failure to maintain discipline, difficulties in conveying subject matter, poor relations with students, or inability to achieve desired outcomes. However, the performance of marginal teachers can be improved with adequate diagnosis and appropriate rehabilitative strategies, since marginal teachers, unlike those who are incompetent, are capable of reasonable performance. Earlier research estimates that between 5 and 20 percent of teachers are marginal. Most previous studies separate the roots of marginality into either professional or personal deficiencies. For the present study, a questionnaire was distributed to 518 elementary and secondary schools in California to determine administrators' perceptions of the scale, causes, and difficulties of marginal teachers and to identify appropriate response strategies; of this total, 131 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 26 percent. According to the responses received, the major perceived causes of marginal teaching included the inability to control classrooms, lack of motivation, burnout, and personal crises. There was general agreement that marginal teachers are uniquely vexing administrative problems. Many administrators were unable to differentiate marginal from incompetent teachers and endorsed simple remedies such as dismissal or reassignment. A variety of personalized intervention strategies were suggested, of which peer coaching and continuous classroom observation were considered to be the two most effective for improving the performance of the use of marginal teachers. (Contains 24 references.) (TEJ)

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A STUDY OF THE MARGINAL TEACHER IN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to identify and categorize types of marginal teachers; to develop a "bank" of strategies for managing each type of marginal teacher; to create a diagnostic process that would assist site administrators in the development of appropriate rehabilitation plans for their marginal teachers.

Methods and Procedures: The research was descriptive in nature. A survey was sent to 518 site administrators in California, proportionate to each educational level: elementary school, middle school or junior high, and high school. Data from the returned questionnaires were categorized by frequency and percent. Analysis of the responses were based on objectives set forth in the purposes.

Findings: Respondents indicated that 10.8 percent of their staffs were marginal teachers. This figure was consistent with other findings in that it fell midway within the range of 5 percent to 15 percent frequently cited by researchers in the literature. Site administrators noted that persistent classroom control, lack of motivation, burnout, and personal crisis were major contributing factors to marginal performance. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that supervising marginal teachers was among their most difficult duties. The amount of time to effectively work with marginal teachers, as well as tenure and protection from teachers' unions were cited as major barriers. Continuous classroom observation and feedback by the site administrator, and peer coaching were identified by respondents as the two most effective strategies for improving marginal teacher performance. Conversely, college classes, observations by the marginal teacher in other classrooms, and staff development workshops were cited as least effective.

Recommendations: A diagnostic/prescriptive approach for identifying specific factors related to a teacher's marginal performance should be developed for site administrator use. Such a diagnostic/prescriptive approach assumes the identification and use of a bank of specific strategies which address the complexity and variety of causes resulting in marginal performance. Training designed to equip school administrators in the use of such a diagnostic/ prescriptive process should be implemented on a continuous basis. Research should then be conducted to determine the degree of positive impact on marginal teachers' performance, and the findings should be compared to those found in the literature using current remediation strategies. Finally, additional research should be implemented to identify feasible ways to address the problem of time, cited as one of the major reasons for the difficulty in working successfully with marginal teachers. It would be naive to assume that administrative responsibilities will be reduced in the near future with growing concerns regarding reduced budgets. Therefore, having the necessary time required to adequately work with marginal teachers is and will probably continue to be a major concern of site administrators. Creative approaches must be identified/developed for using other resources to address the problem of lack of time.

I. BACKGROUND

The nation is gearing up for a massive educational restructuring in what may be a final effort to bring back the quality and reputation that America's public schools once held. Although much thought has gone into changes in organizational structure and innovative programming, a major issue regarding thousands of teachers who function at substandard levels in all too many classrooms has yet to be addressed (Elam,et.al., 1992). Even the latest educational reform proposals indicate little concern for this growing problem, and the difficulties that confront the site administrators who work with these ineffective teachers (Arnold, 1986).

Definitions and descriptions of the unsatisfactory teacher vary, but seem to center on a teacher who is functioning at substandard levels, yet cannot truly be labled as incompetent. (Frase & Hetzel, 1990; Riehl, 1992; Bridges, 1986 & 1985; Fuhr, 1990; Sweeney & Manatt, 1984, Johnson, 1991) . Only two states, Alaska and Tennessee, have attempted to define the term. (Bridges, 1990). Thus, lacking firm guidance, site administrators are left to determine their own criteria.

Johnson (1984) estimates that from 5 to 20 percent of all public school teachers perform below reasonable standards. Even at the 5 percent level, this translates to over 110,000 teachers who are not meeting the needs of their students. Frase & Hetzel, 1990). Other experts place the percent at even higher levels.

Research studies on this topic that have been conducted over the years clearly point out that a teacher may become marginal for a variety of reasons. (Frase & Hetzel, 1990; Riehl, 1992; Fuhr, 1990; Arnold, 1986). Typical indicators often considered in determining who is marginal include the following: failure to maintain discipline, inability to effectively impart subject matter, lack of subject matter mastery, inadequate relationships with students, failure to produce desired results in the classroom. (Bridges, 1990).

For whatever reason, site administrators seem to have difficulty identifying marginal teachers, at least on evaluation forms. A recent review of site administrators' ratings of teachers revealed that site administrators rank 98.2 percent of their faculties as perfect, and only 2/10ths of 1 percent as unsatisfactory. (Langlois, 1988). Generally speaking, most site administrators have received little training in how to identify the causes of a teacher's poor performance and prescribing appropriate intervention strategies. (Bridges, 1984). Coupled with site administrators' general perceptions of the "successful" teacher cited above, most marginal teachers have become accustomed to receiving satisfactory evaluations in the past. It is no wonder that they become defensive when presented with negative evaluations or other efforts which suggest that there is any type of problem with their work. This leaves the school site administrator responsible for managing a critical problem with few options, due to a lack of knowledge about effective interventions and their application.

The purpose of the study was to expand upon what is currently known and understood about site administrators' thinking and actions regarding marginal teachers. Specific objectives were as follows: 1) to identify and categorize various types of marginal teachers; 2) to develop a "bank" of strategies for managing each type of marginal teacher, and 3) to develop a diagnostic process that would assist site administrators in the development of appropriate rehabilitation plans for their marginal teachers. Since we were concerned with marginal, not incompetent teachers, the focus of our work is on rehabilitation, not dismissal. While it may be true that marginal teachers with certain problems are not salvageable, we believe that with adequate diagnosis and appropriate strategies, the performance of many can be dramatically improved.

Definition of Terms:

Marginal teacher - a teacher who has persistent and recurring difficulties in one or more of the following areas: subject matter mastery; ability to impart the content to students, producing desired results, rapport with peers and staff, physical and/or emotional stability in teaching. (Bridges, 1985).

Incompetent teacher - one who lacks the abilities, power, and/or fitness to ever meet the legal qualifications for performing the duties and responsiblilties of a classroom teacher.

Site Administrator - school site principal or principal/superintendent selected to participate in this study.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Defining the term "Marginal Teacher."

Although there seems to be some disagreement among the experts in differentiating between marginal and incompetent teachers, most provide similar descriptors. Based on data obtained from more than 750 site administrators, Sweeney and Manatt (1984, p. 25) provide the following picture of a marginal teacher: "one who appears to have sufficient command of subject matter, but whose lack of classroom management skills gets in the way of student learning" and "displaying tacit hostility towards supervision . . . up and down personalities (extremely gushy or gloomy)." Arnold (1986, p. 8), on the other hand, defines incompetence as "being incapable, lacking adequate power, capacities or ability to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the position. This may apply to physical, mental, education, emotional or other personal conditions." Riehl (1992, p. 13) describes marginality as "a concept which encompasses the notion of a zone of tolerance within which some unsatisfactory teachers perform." Huge and Manatt (1983) view the marginal teacher as one who simply does not meet the school's organizational standards. Bridges (1984), although acknowledging that the courts have little statutory basis when hearing dismissal cases, does point out that some courts have used the following standards to make such decisions: "1) no permanent damage has been done to the students, faculty or school; 2) the teacher could have corrected the deficiency had he/she been warned by school administrators,

3) the conduct has not existed over such a long period of time so as to become irremediable" (1984).

Perhaps the most succinct differentiation was made by Fuhr (1990, p. 1.) who stated, "a marginal teacher is one whose performance borders on incompetency, but who is not incompetent." Many site administrators call this person a "fence rider," a teacher whose work vacillates between good and bad, but mostly is bad. As can be seen, there is a difference, although somewhat hazy, between the nature of the incompetent teacher and the marginal teacher. This is a critical point since the ability to differentiate between the two has a direct bearing on what steps site administrators should take in supervising them.

Nature and extent of the problem

In recent years the general public's view of schools in the U.S. has been slipping. (Elam, et.al., 1992) In 1983, A Nation At Risk was released in which the U.S. Department of Education offered recommendations for improving America's schools. One of those recommendations directed educators and elected officials to take a leadership role in achieving badly needed reforms. One such reform was the need to develop an effective teacher evaluation system that differentiated between superior and incompetent teachers. Arnold (1986. p. 1) comments, "Too often, the efforts and accomplishments of the nations very able teachers are overshadowed by the poor performance of a relatively small number of incompetent classroom teachers. The accomplishments of the competent

majority will continue to be overlooked and unappreciated unless site administrators deal directly with unsatisfactory teachers."

Experts have estimated that the number of practicing teachers who are either incompetent or below reasonable standards ranges from 5 percent to 20 percent. (Johnson, 1991). If one accepts even the most conservative estimate of 5 percent, the total number of incompetent teachers is the nation's schools would be over 110,000. Assuming that each teacher instructs a class that averages 18.9 students, over 2.7 million students would be receiving substandard instruction each day. This figure exceeds the total combined enrollment of the fourteen smallest states in the U.S. (Bridges, 1985). Groves (1986) applied this same formula to the State of California and determined that nearly 9000 substandard teachers were working with over 200,000 students. Obviously, with the growth in enrollment that the State has experienced over the past five to eight years, the numbers would be much higher today. As Frase and Hetzel (1990, p. 101) put it, "the severity of the problem can no longer be in doubt, and educators can no longer ignore it."

Origin of models and strategies

Most of the research identified for this study make some reference to various strategies to be used with marginal teachers. (Sweeney & Manatt, 1984; Carey, 1980; Duttweiler, 1988) Some of these experts (Carey, 1980; Riehl, 1992; Duttweiler, 1988) elect to present their findings as descriptive data, whereas others (Frase, & Hetzel, 1990; Bridges, 1984; Fuhr, 1990; Glickman, 1987) offer their strategies in conjunction with some sort of

diagnostic/prescriptive paradigm. The origin of nearly all of the strategies comes from the experiences and opinions of typical school site administrators.

In selecting strategies to include in our survey questionnaire we identified those which were mentioned most frequently in the literature. Because of our interest in developing a "bank" of strategies with prescriptive potential we especially focused on models developed by several of the researchers. (Frase, & Hetzel, 1990; Fuhr, 1990; Bridges, 1984; Ordiorne, 1983). Most of these models tend to begin their various approaches for working with marginal teachers by attempting to identify the specific causes that resulted in teaching malfunction. Some researchers used basic variables to form four celled paradigms for use as general diagnostic tools (Glickman, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, Ordiorne, 1983), while others developed categories with specific attributes that could be used like checklists (Bridges, 1990; Riehl, 1992; Arnold, 1986). Still others used a more broad approach by describing narratively marginal teacher types. (Fuhr, 1990; Huge & Manatt, 1983). In nearly all cases, these models and processes tended to separate the roots of marginality into either "professional" (competency deficiencies) or "personal" (physical, social, emotional deficiencies). Although, few made direct connections of remediation strategies to type of cause of marginal behavior (Bridges, 1990; Fuhr, 1990), many recommend various management processes (Frase & Hetzel, 1990; Sweeney & Manatt, 1984; Huge & Manatt, 1983; Bridges, 1985) for working with these teachers.

Much of the literature paints a gloomy picture regarding the potential for rehabilitating marginal teachers. Pfeiffer (1984) notes that approximately 10 percent of employees in industry whose performance is not adequate ever attain a satisfactory level or higher. Frase and Hetzel (1990, p. 104) support this view stating, "This percentage matches the authors' experience in public schools."

Origin of models/strategies; focus on dismissal

Much of the literature reviewed for this study either directly or indirectly pointed in the direction of dismissal as the most plausible way to deal with marginal teachers. (Frase & Hetzel, 1990; Sweeney & Manatt, 1984; Fuhr, 1990; Huge & Manatt, 1983; Groves, 1985; Bridges, 1985). However, most districts and site administrators, acknowledge an obligation to help teachers succeed. The question which faces all is "how much obligation and for how long?" (Frase, & Hetzel, 1990, p. 104). Whatever the answer, it is important to ensure that marginal teachers receive all of the possible assistance available so that they can do a creditable job if they are to continue in the classroom.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study addressed the process of effectively working with marginal teachers. It specifically focused on the identification of strategies to upgrade the performance of these employees. A descriptive research design was used which employed the use of a questionnaire to determine

the experiences and opinions of site administrators in California in regard to their perception of marginal teachers.

A questionnaire was designed for site administrators focusing on the following: number of marginal teachers on the typical staff; perceived competencies and attitudes of marginal teachers; factors contributing to the behavior/condition of marginal teachers; and the identification of strategies that work effectively with these teachers. The instrument was pre-tested with approximately 35 site administrators representing all three levels of instruction.

A random sample of 518 school site administrators was drawn from three levels: elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school. The sample was selected randomly proportionate to the number of schools at each level in the State.

A total list of 6,716 schools was identified throughout the State. In order to select a representative sample, every 13th school from the list was selected. This provided the researchers a sample of schools from every county in the State as well as small, rural and/or large metropolitan areas. The sample consisted of 8 percent of the total schools in the state with the breakout indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Number in Sample and Percent of Total Population

Level	Number Surveyed	Percent of Total
Elementary Schools	382	8
Middle Schools	78	8
High Schools	58	8

The number of respondents by educational level is indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Survey Respondents by Educational Level

Level	Number of respondents	Return
Elementary Schools	90	24
Middle Schools	16	21
High Schools	25	43

Overall, 131 or 26 percent of the surveys were returned. A follow-up telephone survey conducted to check on possible variance with information held by non-respondents, produced very similar data.

Response data were tabulated and summarized by frequencies and percentages. The results of the Statewide survey are reported below.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Question 1: Percent of Perceived Marginal Teachers

Site administrators were asked to estimate the number of marginal teachers they perceived on their staffs. Table 3 shows the responses by graduated groups.

Table 3. Number of Marginal Teachers as Reported by Site Administrators

Level	Number	Percent of total staff
Elementary School (Grades K-6)	252	10.7
Middle School (Grades 7-8)	98	16.9
High School (Grades 9-12)	118	8.5

Based on a figure of 4,343, the total number of teachers reported by administrators was 468 or 10.8 percent, which is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Johnson, 1991; Groves, 1986). Our study also showed that the middle school administrators perceived a higher than average percent to be marginal.

Question 2: Ranking of Perceived Factors

Site administrators were asked to identify the factors that contributed most to the condition(s) of their marginal teachers. Table 4 shows their responses by educational level.

Table 4. Site administrators' Perceptions of factors contributing to marginal teaching

Level	K - 6	7 - 8	9 - 12
Personal crisis	36	5	6
Inadequate preservice training	5	2	2
Burnout	35	6	8
Lack of motivation	35	5	16
Physical problems	5	0	2
Not suited to subject or grade level	21	5	5
Changing student demographics	28	4	8
Teacher perceives lack of administrative support	7	3	3
Unsafe working conditions	0	0	0
Teacher perceives lack of parental support	10	3	4
Immaturity	0	1	4
Persistent class control problems	49	9	15
Inadequate inservice training	6	5	3
Philosophical differences between teacher and his/her evaluator	9	3	2

The major factors identified by administrators were the following:

Persistent Classroom Control Problem	73 responses or 18.0%
Lack of Motivation	56 responses or 13.8%
Burnout	49 responses or 12.1%
Personal Crisis	47 responses or 11.6%

- All levels designated "persistent class control" problems as of major importance.
- All levels identified "burnout" as an important factor.

- Secondary site administrators saw "lack of motivation" as the top ranked contributing factor.
- No particular importance was placed on "philosophical differences between teacher and his/her evaluator" at any level.
- "Teacher perceives lack of administrative support" was not identified as a problem by any of the levels.
- No level indicated that "Immaturity" was a contributing factor.

Question 3: Site administrators' Perception of Difficulty in working with marginal teachers.

Administrators were asked to rate the level of difficulty in supervising their marginal teachers. Their responses are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Level of Difficulty in Supervising Marginal Teachers as Perceived by Site Administrators.

	K-6	7-8	9-12	Total
No more difficult than working with any of the other teachers	14	3	4	21
The toughest task I face	12	2	4	18
Among my more difficult duties	58	9	17	84
Don't know or decline to respond	5	0	0	5
TOTAL				125

As can be seen, 80 percent of the respondents indicated that supervising marginal teachers was rated as "among my more difficult duties" to "the toughest task I face." Only 16 percent indicated that the task was "no more difficult than working with any other of their teachers."

Question 4: **Reasons for Difficulty in working with marginal teachers.**

Reasons given for this response are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Site administrators' perceptions regarding the difficulty of working with their marginal teachers

	K-6	7-8	9-12
Lack of adequate time	7	2	1
Tenure and/or union protection	4	0	0
Marginal teacher's personal problems	1	0	0
Marginal teacher's attitude (poor response to administrators)	1	0	0
Marginal teacher's lack initiative	1		0
Difficulty in changing people's habits	0	0	1

Most site administrators at all levels of instruction identified working with marginal teachers as "among their more difficult tasks."

Question 5: **Strategies used by administrators to work with marginal teachers.**

Site administrators were asked to evaluate ten strategies typically used in an effort to improve the performance of marginal teachers. The ratings were based on a 1 to 4 scale:

1 = caused significant change in the teacher's competencies and/or behaviors.

2 = caused some change in the teachers' competencies and/or behaviors.
3 = caused no significant change in the teachers' competencies and/or behaviors.
4 = I have not tried this strategy.

Table 7 displays the frequency of responses for each of the ten strategies.

Table 7. Site administrators' ratings of intervention strategies used with marginal teachers

	K-6					7-8					9-12					
	1	2	3	4	%	1	2	3	4	%	1	2	3	4	%	K-1 Ave
Peer Coach	13	41	25	10	60	4	6	3	4	63	4	16	4	1	80	68
Staff Develop.	2	53	31	0	61	2	9	4	0	69	1	11	11	0	48	59
College Classes	2	15	40	26	19	0	0	8	7	0	0	3	14	3	12	16
Counseling	1	9	16	54	11	1	4	3	7	31	0	3	6	14	12	18
Self Analysis	1	9	4	66	11	2	3	0	10	31	2	5	2	15	28	27
Change of Envir	9	40	29	12	54	3	3	6	3	38	0	7	15	2	28	40
Materials	4	59	22	3	70	1	11	2	1	75	0	10	12	1	40	62
Observations	20	50	14	5	78	6	7	1	1	81	4	11	1	4	60	73
Observe Another Teacher	8	38	33	6	51	2	9	3	1	69	2	8	1	4	40	53
Joint Planning	8	41	14	22	53	3	8	1	3	69	1	10	1	6	44	55

In analyzing the data presented in Table 7, a summary of the highest and lowest strategies are fairly clear. They are listed below.

Composite summary of highest and lowest strategies

Three Highest Strategies		Three Lowest Strategies	
1) Systematic Observation	73%	1) Self Analysis	27%
2) Peer Coaching	68%	2) Counseling	18%
3) Special Materials	62%	3) College classes	16%

The responses from the sample of site administrators suggest that "Continuous Classroom Observation" by the site administrator followed by "Peer Coaching" are the two most effective strategies for changing the performance of marginal teachers. The three most frequent strategies indicated by site administrator as least effective for improving the performance of marginal teachers are "College Classes," "Observations by the teacher in other classrooms," and "Staff development workshops."

These distinctions are not decisive. Each category also received substantial support in the "caused some changes" rating as did "materials that you or the teacher's supervisor prescribed." Clearly, the "teacher's self-analyses of lessons videotaped in his/her classroom" was the strategy most likely not to have been tried by the respondents.

Although these data are not conclusive, in general it does appear that site administrators in the sample view direct prescriptive intervention involving themselves and/or other faculty members in continuation with staff development workshops as more effective than less prescriptive intervention strategies.

V. CONCLUSIONS

- There are a variety of causes which lead to marginal teaching.

- Marginal teachers' problems are complex, and often entwine attitudinal difficulties and skills deficits.

- Site administrators view working with marginal teachers as one of their more difficult tasks, in part because a disproportionate amount of time is required. In addition, they find many marginal teachers to be defensive and difficult to work.

- One of the greatest difficulties in working successfully with a marginal teacher is the identification of specific weaknesses and/or problems.

- Most site administrators fail to recognize the subtle differences between teachers who are marginal and those who are truly incompetent.

- Many site administrators take a position of "insulating" their marginal teachers, implementing short term, simple remedies such as switching grade levels or seeking transfer or dismissal, rather than taking a systematic approach with instructional improvement as a goal.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- A diagnostic prescriptive approach for identifying specific factors related to a teachers' marginal performance should be developed for site administrators' use.

- A diagnostic prescriptive approach assumes the identification and use of a bank of effective strategies which address the complexity and variety of causes of marginal performance.

- A variety of intervention strategies need to be utilized in designing personalized prescriptions for marginal teachers. Site administrators should make greater use of outside resources, e.g. counseling when working with marginal teachers whose primary problem is attitude and/or personal in nature.

- Since "time" is identified as the major reason for the difficulty in working with marginal teachers, creative ways must be identified/developed for administrators to make use of other resources both within and outside of the school.

- Because there is a distinct difference between marginal and incompetent teachers, the orientation of the intervention plans for marginal teachers should be focused on rehabilitation rather than on dismissal.

- Training for principals on how to systematically use diagnostic/prescriptive systems with their marginal teachers should be included as an integral part of school districts' administrative staff development programs.

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